



The Spirituality of Rabindranath Tagore

- Anirvan Mukherjee

Introduction

There are different opinions regarding the 'subject matter' of spirituality. To some – spirituality is purely the subject matter of religion – whereas for others, spirituality has a broader meaning. In the 'broader context' definition, besides religion - education is also considered as a means for attaining spiritual experience, since true knowledge also leads to an 'inner uplift' of the soul. This article attempts to explore Tagore's spirituality in a 'broader context'. Though Rabindranath Tagore is sometimes referred to as 'the great mystic from the East' – it is necessary to realize that, he was essentially a poet. In fact he never wanted to be labeled a theologian or a philosopher. As regards spiritualism, in his own words – at the age of 18, he experienced "*a sudden spring breeze of religious experience for the first time ... I became conscious of a stirring of soul within me*". Throughout his life, a number of Tagore's writings and devotional poems deal with religious experience & spirituality.

Liberal Outlook

In order to understand Tagore's spirituality, a brief understanding of his childhood environment is essential. Though Tagore came from a landed and wealthy Hindu family – that took *noblesse-oblige* for granted, the family environment was – in his own words – "*a confluence of three cultures: Hindu, Mohammedan and British*". As a result, Tagore's outlook was liberal and cosmopolitan. This set him apart from contemporary mystics. For example, he never advocated renunciation as a means for seeking God. Rather he accepted life as it is and enjoyed the manifold beauties of life and nature enthusiastically.

So Tagore - in his poem advises the priest to leave his singing and chanting and seek God where the tillers are tilling the soil or the path makers are breaking the stones.

"Leave this chanting and singing and telling of beads! Whom dost thou worship in this lonely dark corner of a temple with doors all shut? Open thine eyes and see thy God is not before thee!"

He is there where the tiller is tilling the hard ground and where the path maker is breaking stones. He is with them in sun and in shower, and his garment is covered with dust. Put off thy holy mantle and even like him come down in the dusty soil!



Deliverance? Where is this deliverance to be found? Our master himself has joyfully taken upon him the bonds of creation; he is bound with us all forever.

Come out of thy meditations and leave aside thy flowers and incense! What harm is there if thy clothes become tattered and stained? Meet him and stand by him in toil and in sweat of thy brow."

Dualism

Tagore's philosophical position was essentially that of a 'dualist' – where there is a constant synthesis between the opposites. So to him freedom is the absence of bondage – but it can only be realized through bondage. To take an analogy: A string and a harp – can produce music together – when they are being bonded to each other. So also life, it realizes its freedom in the midst of bonds. Even Tagore sees perfect harmony between illusion ('Maya') and truth. The world maybe an illusion ('Maya') but it is essential – since without illusion – truth will be empty. This concept is well articulated in the poet's dance-drama composition – 'Chitrangada'.

"Illusion is the first appearance of truth.

She advances towards her lover in disguise.

But a time comes when she throws off her ornaments and veils and stands clothed in naked dignity".

Education

As I stated at the beginning, spiritualism in a 'broader context', also includes education. It is in the sphere of education that Tagore's ideas were truly revolutionary. The origins of his ideas on education, first appeared in an article called 'Tapoban' (Message of the Forest), where he explained how – "*The Forest, unlike the Desert or Sea is living It gives shelter and nourishment to life. In*

such surroundings, the ancient dwellers realized the spirit of harmony with the universe..." This leads him to the idea of a hermitage – when starting his school in Shanti-Niketan. While setting up his school – he looked for a ‘Tapoban (forest)’ like place with an intimate community of teachers & students. Though the concept was based on the ancient system of education (called the ‘Brahmacharya Ashram’) he rejected the rigidity of the old system. His concept of a school was one where the students are in harmony with the nature and also integrated with the rest of the world. Eventually Viswa-Bharati was formed and as we know – the rest is history.

Conclusion

I would like to conclude by quoting a verse from Gitanjali (‘Song Offerings’) which explains the poet’s

experience - that can be gained from meditation:

“I ask for a moment’s indulgence to sit by thy side.

The works that I have in hand I will finish afterwards.

Away from the sight of thy face my heart knows no rest nor respite.

And my work becomes an endless toil in a shoreless sea of toil.

Today the summer has come at my window with its sighs and murmurs;

And the bees are plying their minstrelsy at the court of the flowering grove.

Now it is time to sit quiet, face to face with thee,

And to sing dedication of life in this silent and overflowing leisure.” □

Citation and Nobel Prize Medal

